

TOWARD AN EXISTENTIALIST METAETHICS: BEAUVOIR'S *GROUNDWORK*¹

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ABSTRACT: In her 1947 book *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir sketches the outlines of a systematic existentialist ethical theory. This short and startlingly ambitious text purports to offer nothing less than a new way to meet the challenge of moral skepticism with a theory that at once grounds moral normativity and entails certain first-order moral norms. We argue that Beauvoir offers a distinctive and promising version of metaethical constructivism that deserves to be treated as a live option in contemporary debates. Beauvoirian constructivism has much in common with Kantian constructivist approaches to metaethics. It departs from them in that the Beauvoirian existential imperative to will freedom is derived not from rational agency as such but from contingent features of our embodied subjectivity.

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1. Introduction

In her 1947 book *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir sketches the outlines of a systematic ‘existentialist’ ethical theory.² This short and yet startlingly ambitious text purports to offer nothing less than a new way to meet the challenges of moral skepticism and nihilism. In a conversation with a biographer near the end of her life, *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* was one of the first two works that Beauvoir mentioned as important to interpreting her oeuvre as a whole (Bauer 2001, 159).³ And yet much of the attention the book has received has treated it as a prequel to 1949’s *The Second Sex*, rather than engaging it as a formidable work of philosophy in its own right. Part of the explanation for this neglect is Beauvoir’s own retrospective assessment of the book; despite acknowledging its importance, Beauvoir also called it the book that ‘today irritates me the most’ (quoted in Bauer 2001, 139), claiming that it ‘present[s] inaccurately a problem to which [she] then offered a solution quite as hollow as the Kantian maxims’.

In what follows, we challenge this uncharitable self-assessment on both counts. We think that *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* is a powerful presentation of a perennial human problem to which Beauvoir offers, if not a solution, at least a philosophically substantial response that is both less ‘hollow’ and, ultimately, more plausible than Kant’s. Especially when read in conjunction with Beauvoir’s other work from the late 1930’s through the immediate post-war period, this book already offers a distinctive and promising program, one that deserves to be treated as a live option in contemporary debates in ethics, metaethics, and the foundations of political philosophy.

² The book’s French title, ‘*Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*’ (Beauvoir 1947), has been rendered in the only English translation to date as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, removing the ‘*pour*’ (‘for’, as in ‘notes for...’) and replacing Beauvoir’s indefinite with a definite article. This misleadingly suggests that Beauvoir took herself to have offered a complete substantive ethical theory. Translating the title as *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* avoids this misrepresentation.

³ Notably, the other was not, as one might expect, *The Second Sex*, but *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944), Beauvoir’s other book-length work of moral philosophy.

Our subtitle is ‘Beauvoir’s *Groundwork*’ because, like Kant’s *Groundwork* (Kant [1785] 2011), *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* aspires not to present a comprehensive normative theory but to provide (what we would nowadays call) a ‘moral-psychological’ and ‘metaethical’ framework for understanding moral responsibility, moral motivation, and the nature and force of moral obligation. Both books develop a theory that at once grounds moral normativity and entails certain basic first-order moral norms. Like Kant, Beauvoir focuses on freedom as the normativity-grounding feature of human nature, arguing that immoral action is necessarily unfree. Both *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* and the *Groundwork* are short texts that promise a lot—perhaps too much. Both, arguably, fail to deliver all that they promise. And yet both deserve and repay serious study.

We come to this text not as Beauvoir scholars but as moral and political philosophers struck by the power of Beauvoir’s distinctive ethical vision. Our primary ambition is not to interpret Beauvoir correctly (though we hope to do that, too) but to offer a neo-Beauvoirian ethical and metaethical theory that even those not yet well acquainted with Beauvoir’s work can find compelling.⁴ In this paper, we focus on just one aspect of her work’s contemporary resonance, namely the insights it can contribute to discussions of metanormative constructivism. We undertake a critical reconstruction and qualified defense of a neo-Beauvoirian constructivist metaethics. We go on to locate this view in relation to three rival constructivist approaches—Humean, Kantian, and Hegelian—showing how a Beauvoirian constructivism can incorporate some of the strengths of these approaches while avoiding some of their most notable pitfalls. In short, Beauvoirian constructivism better explains how moral norms can ‘get a grip’ on us than Humean constructivism does, better recognizes the fundamentally social nature both of morality and of human agency than Kantian constructivism, and better acknowledges the possibility of radical critiques of the status quo than Hegelian constructivism. It does so by grounding the normativity of morality not in the structure of rationality or agency (like the Kantian), nor in the idiosyncrasies of our individual psychologies (like the Humean), nor in social practices and forms of life (like the Hegelian) but

⁴ For discussion of a kindred approach to historical texts, see Korsgaard 2022; for an illustration of this approach in action, see Korsgaard 2009. For an overview of recent scholarship on Beauvoir’s conception of freedom, see Kirkpatrick 2023.

rather in contingent and yet universal features of human life such as our mortality, vulnerability, and sociality.

2. Beauvoir's Ethical Theory

Beauvoir's ethical project was set in motion by the Second World War and the moral problems to which it gave rise for European intellectuals—questions about whether to keep one's head down or to resist and, if so, how—as well by the skeptical challenges to morality posed both by late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophical and scientific developments (Nietzsche, Freud, sociology, modern physics). At the outset of *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity*, she sets out to defend the 'existentialist' project from the charge that it lacks the resources to afford concrete moral guidance. According to this charge, existentialism is, at best, a practically inert theory that 'encloses man in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity' (EA 15). At worst, it is 'a doctrine that denies friendship, fraternity, and all forms of love, enclosing the individual in an egoistic solitude' (EPW 203), or even a solipsism, like '[Nietzsche's, which] would exalt the bare will to power' (EA 72). Beauvoir's own conviction was that, so far from being a quietist counsel of despair or a macho celebration of heroic individualism, existentialism is the only moral philosophy that can rise to the demands of the reflection required for responsible collective action in the face of the simultaneous horrors of fascism, capitalism, and imperialism. She set out to show that existentialism requires us to pursue not just our own freedom but also the freedom of everyone else: we must resist oppression wherever we find it.

Beauvoir's is an ethics of 'ambiguity' because its starting point is the fact that we are *ambiguous* in the sense that we are simultaneously both subjects and objects. Much of Beauvoir's description of the human condition—which we are about to reprise—may seem so obvious as to be tedious to rehearse. This is the point. Beauvoir's moral psychology highlights familiar features of human life whose significance she thinks philosophers have often 'tried to mask' (EA 7). Like other constructivists, she aims to ground contested claims about morality in 'characteristic ... utterly commonplace ... feature[s] of human experience' (Korsgaard 2009, 4).⁵

⁵ We are grateful to Jacob McNulty for pressing us to explain Beauvoir's motivation for dwelling on these commonplaces. Since our primary purpose in this paper is to explore the metaethical significance of Beauvoir's view, we can only provide a very synoptic description of her moral psychology and normative ethics. For a fuller treatment, see Dover & Gingerich n.d.

Each of us is an object in that we are embodied, biological creatures, mortal and vulnerable, embedded from birth in unchosen relationships and social structures that we did not choose. We enter the world inside of a *situation*, which includes the particulars of our embodiment, and while we will eventually become capable of transforming some aspects of our bodies and situations, there is no getting away from our embodiment or our situatedness. We can and will die, sooner or later, and there are a multitude of threats and dangers that might make it sooner. In addition to being mortal and vulnerable, we are also dependent. Most dramatically, early in life we depend entirely on others who give birth to us, sustain us, and support or thwart the development of our fledgling agency. More subtly, throughout our lives our desires, beliefs, powers, and capabilities are comprehensively shaped by how we are seen, interpreted, and acted upon by others.⁶ We are—and we are inevitably, often painfully, aware that we are—not only subjects for whom others can appear as objects but also objects for other subjects, whose cooperation and recognition we need.

We are subjects in that each of us is a point of view of perception and experience, gazing upon the world. But our capacities as subjects are not merely receptive. We turn our attention this way or that, depending on what interests us, and we move ourselves through the world. We hatch schemes, casting ourselves into the future. Our ability to do all this all this comprises what Beauvoir calls our ‘natural freedom’ (EA 24). This freedom allows us to change or ‘transcend’ ourselves, making ourselves different (in the sense of having different desires, dispositions, and capacities) than we were in the past, as well as to work, individually and in concert with others, toward changing our situations.

Our objecthood and subjecthood are not simply ships passing in the night: as subjects, we are acutely aware of both, and of the friction between them. From infancy, we have some subjective awareness of our bodily frailty. In childhood, even as we increasingly assert our agency, we know at some level that we need others to survive, and we gradually learn that the caregivers on whom we depend are themselves mortal and vulnerable. As we expand our conceptual repertoire and enter adulthood we increasingly reflectively register (at least *de re* if not *de dicto*) that we ourselves are mortal, vulnerable, dependent creatures. Our myriad

⁶ This truth sits alongside the truth of our capacity to reinterpret, appropriate, and/or resist the ways in which others treat us: ‘each one depends upon others, *and* what happens to me by means of others depends upon me as regards its meaning’ (EA 82, emphasis added).

strategies of distraction and denial only testify to how acutely aware of our ambiguity we are, and how discomfiting we find it.

Beauvoir's term for the discomfort arising from our awareness of our ambiguity is *anxiety* ('*angoisse*', sometimes translated as 'anguish') (EA 34). Anxiety is a very basic emotion involving awareness of our objecthood paired with an aversive affective response. We face it in a primitive form even as infants; as soon as we are born, we encounter the pain of separation and susceptibility to bodily harm. As vulnerable and dependent creatures who face a multitude of physical and social threats that could destroy us, an affective impulse that recoils from our own vulnerability and dependence helps to motivate us to develop increasingly sophisticated strategies for physical and psychic self-sustenance. This primitive anxiety is simply part of what it is for vulnerable beings to have a *conatus*.

In childhood, however, we are somewhat insulated from anxiety insofar as our grownups attempt to protect us from a full awareness of our vulnerability (which palliates our uncomfortable awareness of our objecthood) and insofar as we can ultimately look to their authority to vindicate our way of life (which palliates our uncomfortable awareness of our subjecthood by forestalling a sense of responsibility). If we are lucky enough as children to feel safe and confident in the sense that the grownups are in charge, we will be 'protected against the risk of existence by the ceiling which human generations have built' over our heads (EA 36).

As we grow older, however, we gradually come to recognize, with an anxious gulp, that *we are the grownups*. At the same time, anxiety becomes more pressing because of our heightened reflective awareness of our own mortality, vulnerability, and dependence. Indeed, this anxiety is exacerbated by our awareness of having once been children (EA 35), as memories of childhood provide us with a striking (and often humiliating) proof of our dependence on others. This is anxiety in its full-fledged, adult form. To meaningfully respond to anxiety, we need to adopt a stance toward our own subjecthood and objecthood that makes the tension between them less intolerable. Beauvoir calls the practice of cultivating such a stance '*assuming* our ambiguity': 'assuming' it, not in the sense of positing it as a premise, but in the sense of taking it up as a burden and a task.

We do this, in part, by adopting concrete *projects* through which we launch ourselves, in an ‘indefinite movement’ (EA 28), toward an ‘open future’ (71). Our projects make ‘values spring up in the world’ (15), but these values remain dependent on the future-oriented character of the projects that give rise to them. As Michelle Kosch puts it, ‘[p]rojects in process confer value’, while ‘[c]ompleted projects fall lifeless to the ground as I turn to other things’ (forthcoming). As movements from the past into the future, our projects are shaped and constrained by our socially situated embodiment, but at the same time they manifest our capacity to shape and transcend our situations.

Beauvoir often describes the effort to assume our ambiguity as an attempt to *justify* ourselves. Her conception of justification is, roughly, a secular equivalent to the Christian notion of salvation, and responds to the same unpleasant realities—mortality, vulnerability, dependence. Like Christian salvation, justification attaches not to individual actions but to entire lives. If we fail to justify ourselves, we will remain mired in the anguished state produced by our reflective awareness in concert with our embodied vulnerability. As we age and our mortality and dependence become ever more salient, this anxiety, and the corresponding drive to justify ourselves, will likely only intensify.

The search for justification will never exempt us from the anxiety that is the lot of all subject-object ambiguities. For Beauvoir, ‘as long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition’ (EA 7). Unlike Stoicism or Epicureanism, existentialism does not promise tranquility. However well we live, we inevitably face the possibility of ‘real failures and real earthly damnation’ (34). But the attempt to justify ourselves can at least partially alleviate our anxiety, since rather than sitting around like a potato wherever we happen to have been thrown, we are actively casting ourselves into the future, transcending and transforming—though never entirely escaping—our embodied situations.

Beauvoir derives a single, highly general normative claim from this moral psychology. Her *existential imperative* holds that, on pain of unmitigated anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must will freedom absolutely* (EA 24). Like Kant’s categorical imperative, the existential imperative comes in three non-obviously equivalent formulations, each of which captures the same basic idea in a different way. The first formulation holds that, on pain of unmitigated

anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must will its own freedom*. The second holds that, on pain of unmitigated anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must will the freedom of other subject-object ambiguities*. And the third holds that, on pain of unmitigated anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must seek to abolish all oppression of subject-object ambiguities*. Obviously, we cannot do full justice here to Beauvoir's arguments for these ambitious claims. But we will briefly indicate their shape.

Beauvoir begins by arguing that to justify ourselves, we must will our own freedom. Willing our own freedom means converting our given, 'natural freedom' into 'moral freedom' by relating to our natural freedom in the right way, charting an uncertain course between a resignation that underestimates our natural freedom and a hubris that overestimates it. When we will our own freedom, we project ourselves into the future, but we also accept that we do so from a (vulnerable, mortal, dependent) situation. To will our own freedom, we must avoid pretending that our freedom is radically unconstrained by our situation. But we must also avoid pretending that our situation dictates or unalterably fixes how we project ourselves as subjects into the future. As subjects, we are never fully exhausted by the situations we find ourselves in, or by the projects that we have pursued in the past, or even by the ones that we happen to be pursuing now. By the same token, we cannot comfort ourselves with the thought that anything we do will ever render us fully formed or whole. In Beauvoir's recurring metaphor, we will always be 'at a distance' from ourselves (EA 11-13). The only reconciliation we can hope for is being reconciled to this very distance. We can 'coincide with [ourselves]' only by agreeing never to rejoin' ourselves (33)—agreeing, that is, never to attempt to reconcile our subjecthood and our objecthood by reducing or subordinating one to the other.

There are many ways that we can fail to will our own freedom, which Beauvoir taxonomizes by personifying them in the form of various avatars of ethical failure ('the nihilist', 'the adventurer', and so on). Each of these modes of failure represents either a motivated underestimation or a motivated over-estimation of our natural freedom. These strategies to evade and deflect anxiety may well succeed, at least for a while, at warding off existential torment: some tyrants and petty tyrants are quite content. Like mortality, although anxiety and the drive for self-justification to which it gives rise are basic and inescapable features of human life, they do not always rise to conscious awareness. But as Beauvoir illustrates (see, e.g., EA 42-65), attempts to deny our ambiguity are prone to eventual failure insofar as they rest on a motivated

misapprehension of our natural freedom as greater or lesser than it is. Trying to cast ourselves either as pure subjectivity or as pure objectivity will, sooner or later, leave us stuck in a state of unmitigated anxiety because there is, ultimately, no escaping our embodiment and situatedness. Nor (except by dying) can we escape our subjective capacity to cast ourselves into the future in new ways. Strategies of denying our ambiguity are, for this reason, unstable. Thus we arrive at the first formulation of Beauvoir's existential imperative: on pain of unmitigated anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must will its own freedom*.⁷ When we fail to do so, this is not a failure of rationality but rather a failure to successfully cope with the anxiety we inevitably face.

We cannot justify ourselves by willing our own freedom in isolation from others, however. For we depend on others not only for survival, care, and recognition but also for our very freedom. Our own freedom, for Beauvoir, 'can will itself only by destining itself to an open future, by seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others' (EA 60). If we try to will our freedom alone—if we act as though *we* are free subjects situated in vulnerable bodies but deny the reality of other free subject-object ambiguities—we entomb ourselves. The world becomes a sterile moonscape: 'If I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty' (71). By engaging with the freedoms of others, our own freedom can reach outward into a living world, beyond our small, private lives, and forward into the future, beyond our inevitable deaths: '[o]nly the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity' (71). In an argument that resonates with Samuel Scheffler's (2013; 2018) work on the importance, for our present valuing, of a human 'afterlife', Beauvoir here invokes what we might call the claustrophobia of mortality and argues that open-ended, intergenerational collaboration is the only way to gain a sense of spaciousness in our own lives. When we embrace and support the willing of freedom by others, our own projects can be amplified and given life in ways that radiate beyond our own limited, mortal, individual lives '[i]t is only by prolonging itself through the freedom of others that [our own freedom] manages to surpass death itself and to realize itself as an indefinite unity' (EA 32). For this to happen, others must be able to take up our projects freely and transform them in their own ways, building on what we have started without being bound by it. There are good

⁷ 'The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else' (EA 23). Beauvoir herself often combines two or more of what we are calling the three 'formulations' of her imperative in a single phrase or passage (see, e.g., EA 60; 73; 78); we nonetheless pull them apart because we read her as offering interdependent but distinct arguments for each.

examples of this cooperative, forward-looking freedom-willing dynamic among the various intergenerational projects, such as the feminist, socialist, and anti-colonial movements, in which Beauvoir was herself engaged. The second formulation of Beauvoir's existential imperative holds that, on pain of unmitigated anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must will the freedom of other subject-object ambiguities* (see, e.g., 60; 73).

Willing the freedom of only *some* others (only Frenchmen, for instance) would be self-defeating in the same way that willing only our own freedom would be. Freedom cannot accept such arbitrary limits on itself, for to do so would be to deny its nature as 'indefinite movement' (EA 28). My own individual freedom must be 'a finiteness which is *open on the infinite*' (159, emphasis added). Insofar as you deny the subjecthood of any other subject-object ambiguity, you constrain your own freedom, because that freedom depends on the potential for *any* interaction with a fellow subject-object ambiguity to become a place where you can potentially be recognized by the other as the subject-object ambiguity that you are. Beauvoir's point is not that we have to actively engage in mutual recognition with everyone we meet—our finitude does not allow for that—but rather that we should not think or live in ways that antecedently foreclose such opportunities. When we do this, we cut our own freedom off from resources for projecting itself and transcending our own situations on which it might otherwise draw. We thereby make our own situation more like the product of brute forces—more thingified—than it really is, and in doing so we misapprehend ourselves. The third formulation, then, of Beauvoir's existentialist imperative is this: on pain of unmitigated anxiety, *each subject-object ambiguity must seek to abolish all oppression of subject-object ambiguities*. This in turn requires political action: 'we must end by abolishing all suppression; each one must carry on his struggle in connection with that of the other and by integrating it into the general pattern' (EA 89). Like Kant's Formula of the Kingdom of Ends, this is the broadest and most outward-looking expression of Beauvoir's idea that 'the man who seeks to justify his life must will freedom itself, first of all and absolutely' (Beauvoir 1947, 34-35, our translation).

Beauvoir's existential imperative is not an imperative for any conceivable rational being, nor is it dictated by the very concept of law or duty. At the same time, it applies universally to ambiguous creatures like us. In Kantian terms, it is subjectively, not objectively, universal. It is not a categorical imperative but rather a hypothetical imperative rooted in our ambiguous condition and the anxiety to which that condition gives rise: will freedom absolutely, *or else you*

will be tormented by anxiety.⁸ To the Kantian, this may sound like a vain and vulgar threat. How could morality be grounded in anything so contingent as a mere feeling of anxiety? As we will see, the Beauvoirian should embrace this very contingency: morality depends for its authority on feelings that are part of the subjective experience of creatures like us.

3. Toward a Beauvoirian Constructivism

The central task of contemporary metaethics—and, indeed, a central concern of moral philosophy since Plato—has been to address the question of how morality can bind us. How and why do moral norms and values matter to us as we approach the larger practical question of how to live? What, if anything, makes them especially authoritative or reason-giving? Call this ‘the problem of morality’s special normative authority’—the *problem of normative authority*, for short.⁹

In recent decades, some of the most promising approaches to this problem have been provided by various forms of ‘constructivism’. Moral norms, for constructivists, get a grip on us because (and only insofar as) they already inhere in something about us—about who we are, what we value, or how we act or choose. The hope is that once we properly understand the relevant aspects of ourselves, we will see that we are already morally committed. In what follows, we show how Beauvoir’s distinctive moral psychology—her sense of what it is about us that we need to understand in order to understand morality—yields a persuasive and promising, if not definitive, answer to the problem of moral authority.

We begin with an opinionated survey of what we take to be three of the most compelling contemporary constructivist theories—Sharon Street’s ‘Humean’ constructivism, Christine Korsgaard’s ‘Kantian’ constructivism, and Jack Samuel’s ‘Hegelian’ constructivism.¹⁰

⁸ For a defense of the idea that morality can plausibly be understood as a ‘system of hypothetical imperatives’, see Foot 1972.

⁹ We use the term ‘authority’ in a non-technical way that should be understood as roughly synonymous with, e.g., ‘force’ or ‘bindingness’.

¹⁰ It would take more than one paper to establish that Beauvoirian constructivism is the most compelling constructivism out there. In particular, we neglect five additional contenders that we think are just as promising as the ones we consider here, namely Sharon Street’s more recent, Buddhist-inspired constructivism (2016; 2022); Stephen Darwall’s (2006) Fichte-inspired transcendental vindication of morality; David Velleman’s (2009) ‘kinda Kantian’ metaethics; Paul Katsafanas’ Nietzschean constitutivism (2013); and Kenneth Walden’s (2012; 2018; 2023) constructivism, which

Each of these theories powerfully captures important aspects of our lives as valuing creatures. But none of them is ultimately fully satisfying as a response to the problem of normative authority. Street's Humean constructivism affords deep insights into the nature of normativity generally, but it does not account for why moral considerations should have a special status vis-à-vis other things we care about (such as avoiding the scratching of our fingers). Kantian constructivism and Hegelian constructivism address the problem of normative authority more directly; if their arguments work, Korsgaard and Samuel have shown that something resembling contemporary commonsense morality binds us.¹¹ For the Kantian, it binds us insofar as we are rational agents; for the Hegelian, it binds us insofar as we happen to be situated in a historical context in which this is *our* moral common sense. Even assuming that they can be established via sound arguments, however, both the Kantian and Hegelian versions of constructivism have serious drawbacks, to our minds. In brief, the Kantian makes morality ultimately a matter of individual rectitude, and the Hegelian makes morality ultimately a matter of social conformity.

We go on to argue that Beauvoir's distinctive philosophical anthropology generates a form of constructivism that affords a satisfying response to the problem of normative authority while avoiding both Kantian individualism and Hegelian groupthink. Like the Kantian and Hegelian (but unlike the Humean), Beauvoir has the resources to capture the special status of freedom—and, consequently, of morality—among our ends and values. Like the Hegelian, and unlike the Kantian, she sees our subjectivity and agential capacities as emerging only in relation to our concrete, mortal, socio-historical embodiment. And yet like the Kantian, and unlike the Hegelian, she both acknowledges and valorizes our critical freedom vis-à-vis our social environments. Let us now turn to briefly introduce these three rival views.

3.1 Humean Constructivism

For Humean constructivists such as Sharon Street, moral norms get whatever grip they have on you through other things that already have a grip on you. 'You' here does not mean

centers on interpretability as a condition of agency. We hope to do justice to each of these views in Dover & Gingerich nd. For present purposes, Street's Humean, Korsgaard's Kantian, and Samuel's Hegelian constructivism are the rivals that afford the most illuminating contrasts with Beauvoir's view.

¹¹ 'Contemporary commonsense morality binds us'—where by 'us', Korsgaard means 'us rational agents' and Samuel means something like 'us denizens of modernity'.

‘one’, but rather you, considered as a concrete, particular individual, with all your contingent quirks. According to Street, the substance of your evaluative judgments ‘must ultimately be supplied by the particular set of values with which [you find yourself] alive as an agent’ (2010, 370). For instance, insofar as you care deeply about having tulips blossom in your garden this spring, you might have ‘normative reason’ to plant tulip bulbs now and to fertilize and water them in the weeks to come. There is no deep mystery here about why you should regard the demand to water your tulips as normatively authoritative: you should do so insofar as you care about an end for which watering is a necessary means. The judgment that you have no reason whatsoever to water your tulip beds would (in Street’s words) fail to ‘withstand scrutiny’ from the standpoint of your other normative judgments, such as the judgment that it would cheer you up to see tulips every morning on your way out the door to work, in combination with non-normative facts about what happens to neglected tulip beds.¹²

As Street acknowledges, this view fails to establish that widely accepted moral norms must be authoritative for all rational agents as such (Street 2008, 224). Street famously concedes that an ideally coherent Caligula who aimed ‘solely to maximize the suffering of others’ (Gibbard 1999, 145) might have ‘most normative reason to torture people for fun’ (Street 2009, 275; Street 2016, 165; cf. Hume [1740] 2007, § 2.3.3). Humean constructivism cannot explain how even our most uncontroversial moral norms could be binding or authoritative for those who do not already happen to have anything in their subjective motivational set that commits them to accepting them. Street herself finds this troubling, saying that ‘we should [not] give up on the search for a stronger form of moral objectivity than Humean constructivism delivers’ (Street 2016, 165).¹³

¹² On Street’s view, you can already have normative reason to water your tulips, even though you do not yet recognize or acknowledge that you do, provided that the judgment that you ought to water could be reached via what Bernard Williams called a ‘sound deliberative route’ from your existing ‘subjective motivational set’ (Street 2008, 244; see Williams 1995, 35-45). Street thus has the resources to account for how normative truths can be authoritative independently of our actual judgments. Things like watering our tulips depend for their value on our *ultimately* taking them to be valuable, rather than doing so immediately or occurrently.

¹³ Street’s recent work (2016; 2022) pursues this search, developing a Buddhist-inspired constructivist view that is more ambitious in its aims than her earlier Humean constructivism. Street’s view has many interesting points of contact with Beauvoir’s. For both Beauvoir and Street, the fact that ‘we are so vulnerable that a clear-sighted awareness of that vulnerability can have a corrosive effect on our ability to go forward, leading to crippling anxiety or depression’ (Street 2022, 28) is both a practical problem

3.2 Kantian Constructivism

Kantian constructivism aims to rescue the authority of morality from dependence on the idiosyncratic desires, values, and commitments of individuals. Kantian constructivists do not only attempt to show how *some* norms can get a grip on *each* of us. (The Humean has already done that.) They aim to show how (what they take to be) the *right* norms—*viz.*, the Kantian moral law—can get a grip on *all* of us. As for Humean constructivists, the objectivity of moral norms for Kantians is not the objectivity of agent-independent objects ‘out there in the world’. Rather, it is the objectivity that comes from an idealized procedure of rational deliberation: there are correct ‘answers to moral questions because there are correct procedures for arriving at them’ (Korsgaard 1996b, 36). The Kantian differs from the Humean, however, in believing that those procedures, once properly understood, can be trusted to yield the categorical imperative—every time, for all rational agents as such, regardless of their quirks.

The most powerful version of Kantian constructivist metaethics has been developed by Christine Korsgaard (1996b; 2009). Korsgaard offers a new argument for the Kantian conclusion that the moral law is binding on rational agents as such, regardless of the content of their particular commitments and motivations (Korsgaard 2009, xiii).¹⁴ In brief, Korsgaard argues that in order to act at all, we must legislate for ourselves on the basis of reasons that we can expect ourselves at other times to also accept. But this suffices to make our reasons public, for if a reason is not one that would be binding for any agent, there is no guarantee that it will be binding for my future self (2009, 204; see Korsgaard 2007, 10-11). If Korsgaard is right, ‘every rational agent must will in accordance with a universal law’ and the only way to do so is to legislate for yourself by willing the law of your action ‘to have normative force that can be shared by all rational beings’ (Korsgaard 2009, 214, emphasis added).

From Korsgaard, we have a picture of ethical normativity that makes universal and objective norms authoritative for rational agents as such. If her argument works, does it satisfy metaethicists’ hope for ‘a strong form of ethical objectivity’ while ‘avoiding any hint of

and a prompt to engage in metaethical speculation. That speculation, in turn, yields philosophical resources that can help us to cope with the practical problem.

¹⁴ We offer a detailed treatment of the twists and turns of Korsgaard’s ambitious argument in Dover & Gingerich nd. What matters for us here are the shape and ambition of Korsgaard’s conclusion and the initial picture of human agency from which it emerges.

metaphysical or epistemological mystery' (Street 2022, 21)? Not uncontroversially, since it still affords a weaker sort of objectivity than many realists crave. Although 'public reasons are roughly the same as what are sometimes called objective, or agent-neutral reasons', they are not objective 'on a substantive realist model, as things that exist independently of agents and are grasped and applied by them' but instead 'emerge in the interaction between people' (Korsgaard 2009, 191). However, the moral law, as Korsgaard conceives it, is objective in precisely the way that Kant's categorical imperative is objective. For Kant, the moral law carries with it the concept of an 'objective and hence universally valid necessity' (G, 4:416). For Korsgaard, too, the moral law's objectivity comes from the fact that 'there are constraints on rational choice' that derive from the nature of reason itself (Korsgaard 1996a, x). So, although Korsgaard, like Street, sees 'values and reasons [as] human creations' (Korsgaard 2009, 209), unlike Street, she claims to have sufficient resources to deny that an ideally coherent Caligula could have reason to torture people for fun.

If Korsgaard's argument succeeds, it constitutes perhaps the most powerful secular response to the problem of normative authority ever proposed. Aside from questions about the soundness of her argument, however, it is possible to be troubled by Korsgaard's theory because of what accepting it would mean for how we understand our relations with one another. For Korsgaard, you must will the maxim of your actions 'as a law for every rational being' even if you are a shipwrecked sailor entirely cut off from the social world. You must do so, in the first instance, because you must interact with *yourself* (Korsgaard 2009, 80). Thus, although Korsgaard insists that reasons are best characterized as 'intersubjective' rather than 'objective' (Korsgaard 2009, 191n9), it is nonetheless possible to ground moral obligation 'in the constraints of first-personal deliberation alone' (Korsgaard 2007, 10, quoting and endorsing Stephen Darwall's [2006, 11] characterization of her view).

According to a line of criticism developed by Jack Samuel (2023; forthcoming), Aleksy Tarasenko-Struk (2018), and Kenneth Walden (2018), something crucial is missing from a metaethical theory that locates duties to others ultimately in abstract individual agency, rather than in what R. Jay Wallace calls the 'moral nexus' that connects concrete persons to one another (Samuel 2023, 1457; Wallace 2019; cf. Thompson 2004). On this line of thought, the self-to-other relationship should figure more foundationally in the description both of morality's content and of its normative authority than should the self-to-self relationship. Call

this the *individualism objection* to Kantian constructivism. It holds that there is something deeply troubling about a theory that makes morality’s authority fundamentally the same for the notional shipwrecked sailor as it is for people who live in constant contact and community with one another. Such a theory makes morality out to be much too solitary and individualistic—even, in a certain way, morally solipsistic—because it provides us with ‘only indirect ways of recognizing one another’ (Samuel 2023, 1458).¹⁵

3.3 Hegelian Constructivism

The aim of what Jack Samuel labels ‘post-Kantian constructivist’ theories is to address the problem of normative authority without running into the individualism objection.¹⁶ A core tenet of the post-Kantian philosophical tradition is that our individual agency is a product or effect of our social engagement with others in joint action (see, e.g., Hegel [1807] 2018, ¶¶ 178-201). Post-Kantian constructivists hold that this insight about human sociality needs to be incorporated into our metaethical theorizing from the outset (Samuel 2023, 1464). It is as concrete, socially embedded individuals, not as pure rational agents, that morality ‘gets a grip’ on us. For present purposes, we can take Samuel’s ‘Hegelian’ constructivism as representative. Like Korsgaard, Samuel regards our reflective distance from ourselves as a central feature of our agency: it is what makes us the potentially rational, self-conscious beings that we are. But unlike Korsgaard, Samuel emphasizes that we only gain such reflective distance through processes of mutual recognition in which we interact with others whom we recognize as agents like us, and who, in turn, recognize us as agents like them. ‘What generates our capacity to achieve reflective distance from ourselves ... is the distinctive kind of pushback we get’ in the course of these mutually recognitive relations with others (Samuel 2023, 1466). *Pace* Korsgaard, interacting with ourselves does not suffice to attain the right kind of critical self-

¹⁵ For a contrasting view that sees Korsgaard’s constructivism as representative of ‘the idea that responsibility is properly relative to interpersonal relationships’, see Benson 2000, 92 n. 42; cf. Manne 2013. In our presentation of the challenges that constructivist metaethics addresses, and in particular of the individualism objection, we are heavily indebted to Jack Samuel (2023, 1454; 1455), though we have modified Samuel’s framing to better suit our purposes here.

¹⁶ As noted above (n. 10), there are other promising post-Kantian constructivist theories out there. For a metaethical view that shares Samuel’s Hegelian focus on mutual recognition, and which is explicitly inspired, in part, by Beauvoir, but which does not count as a form of ‘constructivism’ since it maintains a place for mind-independent value, see Julius 2016.

awareness, because we can never mount, to ourselves, quite the same sort of resistance we get from encountering concrete others whose projects and perspectives conflict with ours.

Once the Hegelian constructivist has offered a theory of agency that makes real-life mutual interaction essential for our ability to engage in practical reasoning in the first place, the next step is to show how this social picture of agency can generate a commitment to moral norms. According to Samuel, morality cannot be derived from mutually recognitive relations as such, for there is no such thing as two people simply standing in a generic relationship of mutual recognition and nothing more.¹⁷ Rather, we each stand in all sorts of different, particular kinds of recognitive relations with various different, particular others, each of which has its own distinctive normativity. For instance, I might be part of the ‘Swiftie’ community of fans of Taylor Swift (see Samuel 2023, 1474). Members of this community generally accept certain sorts of Taylor Swift-related reasons for action (for instance, they regard the fact that Swift has released a new song as a strong *pro tanto* reason to listen to it). Being part of this community involves my taking myself to be part of it, as well as being taken to be a part of it by other community members, whom I recognize as Swifties in turn. In recognizing myself as a Swiftie who recognizes and is recognized by other Swifties, I commit myself to accepting Swiftie-normativity.¹⁸ If we were not committed to any such roles or communities, we would lack the reflective resources required for agency.

For the Hegelian constructivist, more general identities and communities gradually emerge over time from such particular ones. Insofar as we have come to recognize ourselves and one another as, say, fellow human beings or citizens of the world, it is because this recognition has developed, over time, from particular identities like spouse, shopkeeper, burgher, citizen of Geneva, and so on. Our commitment to the normativity of *morality* more generally (as opposed to, say, Swiftie-normativity, or the normativity of bourgeois marriage) comes from finding ‘rights and duties woven into’ these particular identities (Samuel 2023, 1475); ‘we do not occupy maximally general practical identities as a logical precondition of

¹⁷ This is one important contrast between Samuel’s view and that of Stephen Darwall (2006).

¹⁸ Of course, this is not to say that the content of Swiftie-normativity is monolithic or uncontested. The rights and duties of a Swiftie are ‘subject to continual negotiation’ (Samuel 2023, 1475). Indeed, we would add, part of what it is to be recognized as a Swiftie in good standing is to be regarded as eligible to engage in the community’s internal normative struggles.

occupying [these] more specific ones, but as the hard-won and still-incomplete result of a historical process through which more parochial communities become knitted together' (Samuel 2023, 1475). It is in this way that general moral norms such as the categorical imperative may be constructed—not necessarily, as a matter of rational deduction, but contingently and gradually, over the course of time—from the more specific norms inherent in narrower communities and relationships. There is no guarantee that our contingent, historically-evolved forms of life will give rise to any particular norm, such as the categorical imperative. However, Hegelian constructivism does afford a way to diagnose the ideally coherent Caligula as practically irrational that is unavailable to the Humean constructivist. Insofar as Caligula is part of various communities and relationships (a member of the *gens Claudia*, a part of the government of the Roman Empire, a member of the community of Latin speakers, and so forth), he is committed to a wide range of communal norms. If history has gone well (at least from our point of view), these norms will decisively prohibit torturing people for fun and thereby provide Caligula with reason not to; if not, they will not.

Hegelian constructivism accounts for how norms that are embedded in existing communities and social practices can be authoritative. But the way in which it avoids individualism creates its own problems. For it is possible (and perhaps rational) for us to think that our communities and social practices should be entirely different than they are today. The *conservatism objection* to Hegelian constructivism holds that it leaves too little space for radical criticism. It struggles to explain how we could have reason to remake the social world that we now inhabit—a possibility we do not want to rule out on metanormative grounds. Samuel acknowledges that Hegelian constructivism will be most convincing for those who 'find it comfortable to identify with the contingent form of social life in which they find themselves embedded', and who, despite their dissatisfaction with certain of its norms, practices, and institutions, are nonetheless 'at home in the framework they compose, and optimistic that its limitations can be reformed through internal criticism' (2023, 1479).¹⁹ By contrast, those who find the social worlds in which they are embedded 'inhospitable, oppressive, or otherwise

¹⁹ Samuel himself is, of course, in sympathy with those who are dissatisfied with their contingently inherited forms of social life. However, on Samuel's view, moral theory cannot vindicate this dissatisfaction, since all the moral norms that apply to dissidents are derived from the very practices they reject. This means that, according to Samuel (in correspondence), one of the lessons of his view concerns the limits of morality itself.

impossible to identify with' (Samuel 2023, 1479)—in other words, the very gadflies, outcasts, and insurgents whose critiques we might have hoped moral philosophy would help to amplify—are likely to roll their eyes at the Hegelian's appeal to existing mores. Hegelian constructivism risks leaving us with a picture of morality on which we have something to say to an ideally coherent Caligula—someone whose actions run afoul of their communities' dominant norms—but nothing to say to an ideally coherent Kissinger.

3.4 Beauvoirian Constructivism

Is there any way of vindicating a larger swath of commonsense morality than Humean constructivism while avoiding both the individualism of Kantian constructivism and the conservatism of Hegelian constructivism? Yes. Beauvoir's portrayal of our ambiguity gives her the resources to explain how the authority of morality is rooted in our subjectivity. But she portrays our subjectivity in turn as fundamentally concrete and social. Without pretending that we could ever occupy a socially and historically unencumbered standpoint, she can account for how we could have reason to abolish or transform our existing, unsatisfactory forms of life.

Like all constructivists, Beauvoir rejects a 'realist' model of value that treats ethical norms or values as existing 'independently of agents and [merely] grasped and applied by them' (Korsgaard 2009, 191 n9). Morality, for the Beauvoirian constructivist, cannot be 'inflicted on [us] from without' (EA 11). Any universal normativity ethics might turn out to have for human beings would have to emerge from universal features of human life. Where Beauvoir differs both from the Kantian and from the Hegelian is in what she takes to be the relevant features of human life.

3.4.1 Beauvoirian, Kantian and Humean Constructivism

As we have seen, Beauvoir holds that human beings are subject-object ambiguities who possess natural freedom—a potential to act and choose in ways that are different from how we have acted and chosen before. Additionally, we are aware of this freedom: like Korsgaard, Beauvoir holds that we possess a reflective capacity that enables us to 'stand back' from our own bodies and antecedent subjective motivational sets. As on Korsgaard's account, it is in virtue of our reflective capacity that we feel a need to justify ourselves and our actions (compare EA 72 with Korsgaard 2009, 194). Like Korsgaard, Beauvoir emphasizes that—to put it metaphorically, as both Korsgaard and Beauvoir frequently do—this reflective capacity puts at us a distance from ourselves (compare EA 11-14, 36 with Korsgaard 2009, 116).

The key difference is that for Korsgaard, this self-distance is to be overcome through the hard work of self-constitution, while for Beauvoir, it is to be ‘assumed’. Embracing Plato’s pyramidal moral psychology, with reason on top, Korsgaard argues that agents should respond to their internal psychic divisions by working hard to bring their psychic lower orders under the direction of the rational will. This is what success looks like for a Korsgaardian agent; failure means dissolving into a ‘mere heap of unrelated impulses’ (Korsgaard 2009, 204). For Beauvoir, by contrast, this dream of ultimate success—of being ‘consistent and unified and whole’ (Korsgaard 2009, 214)—is, in itself, a denial of our ambiguity and thus a dangerous form of ethical failure. As subject-object ambiguities, we should learn to see ourselves *both* in our desires, motivations, feelings, and projects *and* in the reflective standpoint that will always stand at a distance from them. To will our freedom is to desire this tension, ‘even with the failure which it involves’ (EA 12). What success—assuming our ambiguity—looks like for Beauvoir is not psychic harmony but the skillful navigation of this ineliminable element of failure in human existence. As Beauvoir puts it, we can ‘coincide with [ourselves] only by agreeing never to rejoin’ ourselves (EA 33).

As we saw in §2, Beauvoir holds that in order to assume our ambiguity we must will our own, individual freedom, and we must also will the freedom of all others. Freedom is a ‘universal, absolute end’ (EA 58) and each of us must ‘will freedom within himself and universally’ (EA 78). Restricting the scope of our freedom-willing to ourselves would be to partially objectify ourselves by setting up restrictions on our ability to pursue our own projects, whatever they happen to be. That said, I will hardly turn into a ‘mere heap of unrelated impulses’ if I fail to will my own freedom or that of others; rather, as Beauvoir illustrates, I might turn into a good daughter or shopkeeper or bureaucrat. It is not on pain of total dissolution, but merely on pain of unmitigated anxiety, that subject-object ambiguities ‘must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else’, both for themselves and for others (EA 24).

There is a sense in which the Beauvoirian and Kantian constructivist will always talk past one another, for Beauvoir does not—and does not aim to—secure for morality the sort of authority that the Kantian constructivist had hoped for. Kantian constructivists seek to deliver a moral law that is guaranteed to be binding for any rational being. Korsgaard wants laws that are *both* universally valid *and* objective. They are objective, not in the sense that ethical truths

are out there in the world, waiting to be grasped by our intuition, independently of ‘the human activity of valuing’, but in the sense that the activity of valuing itself ‘has its rules’, and these procedural rules place ‘determinate limitations’ on how we value and choose (Korsgaard 2005, 68).²⁰ In Beauvoir’s view, by contrast, it is misguided to aim for metaethical objectivity, even of the attenuated sort that comes only in the form of determinate procedural rules. Although Beauvoir would be much more amenable to this sort of proceduralist approach to ethics than to a realist intuitionist approach that sets up ‘unconditioned values athwart [our] freedom like things’ (EA 14), she would nonetheless regard it as a way of failing to assume our own ambiguity in that it identifies us exclusively with our positive rational agency (see EA 33).

In other words, both Korsgaard and Beauvoir think that it is a failure—indeed, an *ethical* failure—to be a moral realist, regarding our own values as ‘ready-made things’ for which we are not responsible (EA 35). For Beauvoir, however, even the weak objectivity of Kantian constructivism makes an ethical mistake in that it identifies us exclusively with our rational agency rather than with our ambiguous subjectivity as a whole. This amounts to a falsely ‘consoling ethics’ (EA 8) which ‘trie[s] to mask’ (7) our ambiguity rather than assuming it. Beauvoir instead aims to describe, and derive moral imperatives from, what the subjectivity of ambiguous creatures like us is, in fact (although only contingently) always like. When Beauvoir claims that ‘individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all’ (EA 18), the ‘laws’ she takes herself to have established are not objective. But they are nonetheless subjectively universal for creatures like us.²¹

Beauvoir’s attempt to describe freedom as both an absolute end and as non-objective might sound paradoxical.²² But this combination is familiar from another part of Kant’s critical philosophy. Kant describes judgments of beauty both as resting on a ‘merely subjective ground’

²⁰ As J.L. Mackie points out, ‘Kant in particular holds that the categorical imperative is not only categorical and imperative but objectively so: though a rational being gives the moral law to himself, the law that he thus makes is determinate and necessary’ (Mackie 1977, 30-31).

²¹ Here we disagree with Jonathan Webber’s reading of Beauvoir, according to which ‘Beauvoir’s moral philosophy [in *Toward an Ethics of Ambiguity* and *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*] was grounded in an imperative to respect the *objective* value of the structure of human existence’ (Webber 2018, 171 n1, emphasis added).

²² J.L. Mackie notes the possibility of universalizing subjective judgments (1977, 22-23), but denies that universalization can, by itself, give any sort of meaningful content to moral judgments (1977, 98-99). For a reading of Mackie as a proponent of a subjectivist (but not universalist) theory of ethics, rather than as an error theorist, see Berker 2019. For another recent, ‘unapologetically and unabashedly’ subjectivist existentialist metaethical view, see Berislav Marušić’s reading of Sartre (forthcoming).

(CJ, Introduction VIII, 5:192) and as making a ‘claim to universal validity’ (CJ, §8, 5:214).²³ The analogy between Beauvoirian ethical normativity and Kantian judgments of beauty is partial, and there are important disanalogies as well.²⁴ It nonetheless affords a number of instructive parallels, which shed light on how Beauvoir departs from the Kantian constructivist.

For Kant, a judgment of beauty is subjective in that it is grounded in a subjective sensation of pleasure that does not represent any object (CJ, First Introduction VIII Remark, 20:229-32).²⁵ As Hannah Ginsborg puts it, such a judgment’s ‘ascription to an object in any particular case depends on the sentiments of the particular human being making the ascription’ (Ginsborg 2014, 27). At the same time, judgments of beauty claim universal validity because to feel pleasure in the beautiful ‘is to be in a self-referential state of mind which constitutes awareness of its own appropriateness and hence of its own universal validity’, and so a judgment of beauty is ‘underwritten by the idea of appropriateness or merit’ (Ginsborg 2014, 30-31). In contrast to the case of science, the universality of aesthetic normativity does not derive from any concept or law. And yet, because of our shared human nature, we have strong grounds at least to hope (Cavell 1976, 94)—though not to rationally demand—that others will share our judgments.²⁶

As with Kantian judgments of beauty, the Beauvoirian imperative to will freedom is grounded in our own subjectivity. Its authority rests only on ‘the reflection of the subject on his own state (of pleasure or displeasure), rejecting all precepts and rules’ (CJ, §34, 5:286). Freedom is set up as an absolute end, but it is set up in this way through the feeling of the ambiguous subject. Our movement toward freedom cannot be a mere exercise of will; it must be an expression of the love of life: ‘[i]f we do not love life on our own account and through others, it

²³ Of course, some commentators maintain that Kant was unable to show how judgments of beauty could both be merely subjective and make a universal claim to validity. See, e.g., Ameriks 1983.

²⁴ We explore the parallels and contrasts between Kantian aesthetic judgment and Beauvoirian ethical normativity in Dover & Gingerich n.d.; many thanks to Francey Russell for discussion.

²⁵ For another view that marshals the *Third Critique* for ethical purposes, see Sarah Buss’s (1999) compelling account of why we owe respect to one another as persons. For Buss, ‘the moral significance we attribute to the rational capacity of persons is grounded in our experience of them as sublime’ (Buss 1999, 535). Another important parallel is provided by Hannah Arendt, who makes the Kantian faculty of judgment central to moral and political philosophy (Arendt 1971; for discussion, see Vaccarino Bremner 2023).

²⁶ And yet, as Cavell (1976, 94) notes, ‘even were agreement in fact to emerge, our judgments, so far as aesthetic, would remain as essentially subjective, in [Kant’s] sense, as they ever were’.

is futile to seek to justify it in any way' (135-136). This is why, for Beauvoir, 'to will man free ... is to will the disclosure of being *in the joy of existence*' (135, emphasis added).

The joy of existence that goes hand in hand with willing freedom as an absolute end is not the pleasure of completing a particular project. Rather, '[f]reedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence' (EA 24). In contrast with our specific projects (getting our tulips to bloom, writing a philosophy paper, bringing about socialism in France) freedom is, like happiness for Kant, 'so indeterminate a concept that, even though every human being wishes to achieve it, yet he can never say determinately and in agreement with himself what he actually wishes and wants' (G, 4:418). The value of freedom stands outside and above our particular projects.²⁷ Freedom is a 'universal, absolute end' (58); indeed, it is 'the ultimate, unique end to which man should destine himself' (EA 49). In this respect, it is highly abstract. And yet freedom cannot be willed *as* an abstraction; the 'idea of liberation'—however 'absolute' and 'ultimate' it may be—must be given a 'concrete meaning' (135) for it to have any power for us.

Beauvoir holds that we can find such concrete meanings only in the 'joy' of life—indeed, in the very everyday pleasures that moral philosophers have so often regarded as nugatory. She insists that '[i]f the satisfaction of an old man drinking a glass of wine counts for nothing', then nothing does—not 'production and wealth', and not even 'the idea of liberation' (EA 135). In order for such abstractions to have meaning, 'the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant' (135). The sense in which the old man's pleasure in his wine 'counts' is not the foundational sense in which it would count for a utilitarian. For Beauvoir, it is freedom, not pleasure, that must be desired 'absolutely and above everything else' (24); it is only through an exercise of freedom that pleasure itself, like any other value, can become significant. Yet, at the same time, it is because we are the sorts of beings who can find joy in life that we care about freedom in the first place. We would not (for all Beauvoir says) care at all about the 'freedom' of a joyless rational machine, for such a freedom would have nothing to give it content. For creatures like us, 'the movement toward freedom [only] assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness' (135). This thickening will never happen for us 'if we are not moved by the laugh of a child at play' (135). Such remarks inject an

²⁷ For Kant, our judgments of beauty are occasioned by particular beautiful objects, but aesthetic judgment itself is not a representation of a particular. Similarly, for Beauvoir, we will our freedom by taking on particular projects, but our freedom is not itself located in those projects.

aesthetic element into Beauvoir's moral philosophy: the universality of Beauvoirian ethical normativity arises, like the universality of Kantian aesthetic normativity, through shared *feelings*.

It is for this reason that the universality of the Beauvoirian imperative cannot come in the form of a conceptual guarantee that all rational beings must will freedom as an absolute end. Any expectation I might have that others will join me in willing freedom comes not from the structure of rationality, but from contingently shared features of our ambiguity: the facts that we are mortal, embodied beings, with extended childhood periods of dependence, who are less than fully transparent to ourselves. Insofar as we share these features, I can hope that others will also will freedom as an absolute end. So the authority of morality for Beauvoir is subjective in the sense that it depends entirely on the feelings of particular individuals.²⁸ Yet this authority will nonetheless be humanly universal insofar as Beauvoir is right that we all face the threat of anxiety if we fail to justify ourselves by assuming our ambiguity. Morality is normative for us because of our nature as ambiguous creatures who are both subjects and objects, who will squirm in psychic misery if we cease trying to justify ourselves, but who are also capable of finding great 'joy' in exercising freedom and in struggling for it—for ourselves and for one another.

Many metaethicists will regard these promises of 'joy' and threats of 'anxiety' as rather weak candidates to play the role of 'sanctions' backing morality. But here, it is helpful to compare the 'strength' of 'rationality' itself. As Robert Nozick points out,

the penalty philosophers wield is, after all, rather weak. If the other person is willing to bear the label of 'irrational'...he can skip away happily maintaining his previous belief. He will be trailed, of course, by the philosopher furiously hurling philosophical imprecations: 'What do you mean, you're willing to be irrational? You shouldn't be irrational because...' (Nozick 1981, 4).

Whatever the limitations of the motivational power of anxiety and joy, they have, at a minimum, more straightforward affective significance than does the threat of irrationality. Founding the authority of morality on such touchy-feely ground makes philosophers nervous

²⁸ '[I]t is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself' (EA 17-18).

because feelings are contingent, and philosophers have a habit of wanting their conclusions to be true necessarily. This is especially true when it comes to conclusions about the foundations of morality. Consider, for instance, Kenneth Walden's (2018, 78) observation concern that, 'if human psychology or culture had evolved differently', there might have been 'significant exceptions' to the human tendencies on which David Velleman (2009) seeks to found a constructivist metaethics. Walden treats it as an objection to Velleman's view that these tendencies 'have less modal robustness than we usually associate with morality' (78). Walden would likely raise the same objection to Beauvoir's constructivism. To put the worry in Kantian terms, the Beauvoirian imperative it is a hypothetical, rather than a categorical, imperative (G, 4:415-16).

This is a line of thinking that Beauvoir forcefully rejects. The Beauvoirian existential imperative to will freedom is not a conceptual necessity that comes from being a rational agent; it is (merely?) a felt necessity that comes from being a human subject. The Beauvoirian constructivist joins the Humean in refusing to apologize for this. Our morality, like everything else about us, could have been otherwise. The metaethical—and ethical—task we face is not to flee from this contingency into a fantasy of necessity but to 'come to terms with contingency' (Street 2012, 40)—in Beauvoir's words, to 'assume our ambiguity'.

While Beauvoir's view and Street's have this much in common, a major difference between them is that Beauvoir accords a special ethical role to freedom, which is not merely one value among others but an 'absolute end'. As Beauvoir writes, 'by affirming that the source of all values resides in the freedom of man, existentialism merely carries on the tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel' (EA 17). Although no coincidence of our projects in the Kingdom of Ends is guaranteed, each of us 'must seek to serve the universal cause of freedom' (EA 89). Beauvoir's existential imperative cannot *rationally* bind Caligula as the Kantian moral law purports to do. But in contrast to the Humean, the Beauvoirian constructivist insists that Caligula, like all subject-object ambiguities, must will freedom absolutely.

3.4.2 Beauvoirian and Hegelian Constructivism

Beauvoir's response to the problem of normative authority, like the Kantian's, might appear vulnerable to the Hegelian individualism objection. Indeed, Beauvoir acknowledges that her ethical theory 'is individualistic ... if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his

own existence' (EA 156). However, we have seen how dramatically Beauvoir departs from the individualism of the Kantian constructivist. Unlike the Kantian, Beauvoir does not think that ethical normativity can arise for an isolated individual interacting only with themselves. The central task of ethics is precisely to explain how people, 'originally separated', can 'get together' (EA 17-18). Thus although her ethical theory is individualistic in one sense, Beauvoir contends, 'it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others' (EA 156). Beauvoir thus integrates the Hegelian insight that, without the awareness of my own ambiguity that the resistance of other subjective viewpoints introduces, I could not come to see myself as at a distance from myself—as located *both* in my particular projects *and* in a transcendental perspective with the capacity to indefinitely revise and re-found these projects.²⁹ That is why, for Beauvoir, 'the me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship' (EA 72).

This is a theory according to which we each occupy our own individual standpoint that must justify its own existence for itself. And yet, it is a theory that never forgets that we cannot exist as the subjects that we are apart from our relationships to others. Although it avoids the sort of individualism that Tarasenko-Struck, Walden, and Samuel attribute (rightly or not) to Korsgaard's constructivism, since it does not claim that the moral law can be derived from the conditions of self-interaction alone, many post-Kantian constructivists will nonetheless likely find Beauvoir's view too individualistic. Indeed, Beauvoirian constructivism does not regard morality as fundamentally bipolar (or multipolar). The reason that I must will your freedom is, at the end of the day, that doing so is the only way that I, individually, can justify myself. As for Korsgaard, for Beauvoir any directed duties that I might have run downstream of my individual struggle to justify myself. However, we contend that this need not leave us 'profoundly isolated from one another' (Tarasenko-Struk 2018, 87). Others—not abstract 'Others', but concrete, particular others—are, for Beauvoir as much as for the Hegelian, essential to the formation of individual subjectivity. At the same time, individual subjectivities can indeed be 'profoundly isolated' from their existing communities and relationships. Unlike Hegelian constructivism, Beauvoir acknowledges that our existing communities and relationships might not provide us

²⁹ Here, Beauvoir's account of the role played by others in the formation of subjectivity is analogous to Samuel's description of the essential role played in the development of agency by the 'pushback we get from another we recognize as a recognizer of recognizers' (Samuel 2023, 1466).

with authoritative norms. We regard this as a strength of her view. From our individual standpoints, we can always ask of any social practice—or even all the social practices that we currently inhabit—whether it should be discarded and replaced with something new. Metaethical theory should acknowledge—and celebrate—this human capacity to radically reimagine our social world.

The Hegelian constructivist will insist, at this point, that in order to have arrived at the desire to reimagine our social world in the first place, we must have appealed to some existing discourse or social practice. As Samuel warns, we should be wary of ‘the perennial temptation of a transcendent, ahistorical standpoint from which to criticize the status quo wholesale’ (Samuel 2023, 1479). The Hegelian is right, of course, that no one radically reimagines their social world alone, or *ex nihilo*. We are shaped by our situations, and we must use the resources with which we find ourselves to carry out all our projects, whether radical or incremental. But Beauvoir departs from the Hegelian constructivist in insisting that the individual perspective, once it has been formed, is capable of standing at a distance from its social world. I need to stand in relationships with others in order to be a subject-object ambiguity that can will freedom for itself and absolutely. And yet, as a subject-object ambiguity, it is fully up to me, as an individual, what to value and what projects to pursue. Of course we can never achieve a standpoint that is unconditioned by our situation. But the standpoint of the individual subject is ‘transcendent’ precisely because it is, nonetheless, possible for us to be at odds with our social world—to ask, ‘should these social practices and relationships have any grip on me?’, and to answer in the negative. Indeed, for Beauvoir, any individual who is embedded in dense, freedom-denying social practices already has reason to take such a radical perspective, for only by doing so is it possible for anyone to genuinely justify their existence.³⁰ Insofar as you ask the question of how to live or what to do, you must answer as a subject—an individual subject—even though, of course, your existence as an individual subject itself depends on living in a social world that gives you resources to reflect and to recognize yourself as the natural freedom that you are.

4. Conclusion

³⁰ Since this perspective is, given the contingent nature of our subjectivity, available universally, radical Beauvoirian criticism can still respect what Sanford Diehl calls the *immanence constraint*, according to which social critique ‘must appeal only to normative criteria that are real options’ for the agents who articulate it, ‘given their social and historical circumstances’ (Diehl 2022, 688).

Where does this leave us? We have presented a metaethical view, inspired by Beauvoir's ethical theory, that we call 'Beauvoirian constructivism'. According to Beauvoirian constructivism, the imperative to will freedom as an absolute end is humanly universal, given our inevitable need to justify ourselves. The implications of this existential imperative are not determinate: 'ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art' (EA 134). Nor is freedom the sort of end that can be achieved fully or finally: 'a conquest of this kind is never finished' (157). In the meantime, it calls upon us to 'love life', both 'on our own account and through others' (136). Beauvoirian constructivism presents human agency as fundamentally social, because it is only in relation to concrete others that the reflective capacity to will our own freedom emerges. At the same time, once the subjective perspective of the individual arises, it can stand on its own and resist the authority of the social world's accepted norms.

We think that this is quite an attractive metaethical theory, on the whole. It is a metaethics that speaks to embodied, mortal, vulnerable beings, who are never fully rational, self-transparent, or self-sufficient, and who seek to construct and sustain meaningful lives amid the full range of ordinary human emotions and vicissitudes. True, it does not vindicate the supra-human objectivity of moral norms. But Beauvoir persuasively argues that attempting to live human lives according to supra-human standards would itself be a substantive ethical failure. While for Kant, the road to our ultimate secular salvation through Enlightenment is paved by the nature of our own rational agency, for Beauvoir, moral reflection is necessary precisely because the course of ethical life is not laid out for us in advance—not by God, not by some depersonalized metaphysical reality, and not even by rationality. What we make of our freedom is up to us. Against the 'motionless future' of Kant's perpetual peace (EA 105), Beauvoir embraced Trotsky's vision of the future as a 'permanent revolution' in which 'freedom will never be given; it will always have to be won' (119).

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